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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN DFM DENISOV ON GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Daniel Russell.
Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

11. (C) Summary: In an April 15 meeting with First Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Denisov, the Ambassador expressed strong concern over Russian actions towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including reports of the opening of "offices" in the two territories. Denisov said Russia did not seek a return of conflict to the South Caucasus, and pointed to Georgian efforts to increase its military capacity in the Upper Kodori, with the Georgian forces a "well-trained military machine." Emphasizing that Russia would not cross the red-lines of Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity, Denisov said Russian actions -- while "irritants" to Georgia -- were humanitarian and denied that Russia intended to deliver arms into a conflict zone. Denisov declined to be drawn out on the upcoming presidential decree, but said that the offices would bring official services closer to those who hold Russian citizenship but not constitute diplomatic recognition of the separatist governments. Separately, the Ambassador underscored the need for common front with the German Ambassador, and will make the same point in a Quad Ambassadors' meeting tomorrow. End Summary

Denisov: Russia Respects Red-lines

12. (C) In an April 15 meeting with First Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Denisov, the Ambassador expressed strong concern over increased Russian-Georgian tensions with respect to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While the U.S. had conveyed a message of restraint to the Georgian leadership and would continue to do so, the lifting of CIS sanctions and reports of an imminent presidential decree on the establishment of Russian "offices" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia raised questions and concerns over GOR intentions. The Ambassador underscored that these actions appeared to undercut Georgian territorial integrity. Noting Georgian concerns over the prospect of Russian military support to Abkhazia in the wake of the lifting of the sanctions, the Ambassador asked Denisov to clarify Russian actions and to explain the function of the "offices."

13. (C) Denisov responded that neither Russia, as a mediator and neighbor, nor the U.S., as a special friend of Georgia, wanted to see a degradation of the situation in the South Caucasus and a return to war. Denisov noted that, while he had no specific evidence to provide the Ambassador, "various information" suggested that the Georgian Ministry of Interior was strengthening its military capacity in the Upper Kodori gorge. While there was no reason to suspect an imminent military threat, the "process is on-going." Denisov argued that there was no comparison between Abkhaz military contingents and the Georgian military force. Thanks to the U.S. and some European countries, he said, Georgia was now

the most capable military power in the region, surpassing Azerbaijan. Denisov took the Ambassador's point that U.S. military training was in the context of fighting Chechen terrorism in the Pankisi Gorge and in participating in the multilateral force in Iraq. While the U.S. had "understandable and pragmatic" interests in assisting Georgia, the "obvious outcome" was that Georgia now had a "strong and well-trained military machine that outstripped its needs."

¶4. (C) Denisov noted, but did not elaborate on, Kosovo's role in exacerbating the tensions, but said that Russia respected two red-lines: Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. While some Russian steps may appear to be "irritants," or be portrayed that way by the GOG in an effort to raise emotions, Russia would not cross those red-lines. Denisov reiterated that Russia had introduced the CIS sanctions in 1996 in order to put pressure on the Abkhaz regime and to rein in its provocative behavior. The situation had fundamentally changed. It was regrettable, he argued, that Georgia had not been first to lift the sanctions, which would have created a positive environment for building confidence between the parties, along with fostering the social interaction and economic rehabilitation that would be essential for any final settlement. The Russian decision, he reiterated, was motivated by a desire to ease the living standards of the residents of Abkhazia, which had become disastrous.

¶5. (C) Denisov acknowledged concerns that by lifting sanctions, direct Russian military assistance would ensue, but averred that Russia had the international responsibility and obligation not to deliver arms into a conflict zone and "Abkhazia clearly is a conflict zone." Denisov underscored that Russian actions had been spelled out in advance by Putin to Saakashvili. While Denisov admitted that Russian actions raised suspicions and created a small risk of upsetting the fragile balance in the region, there was no intent to cross the red-lines. Instead, Russian actions were humanitarian.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador pushed for an explanation of the new offices, which media reported would be established by presidential decree on April 18, but Denisov said he was not ready to comment in advance of seeing the final text. In general terms, Denisov noted that the purpose of the Russian office in Taiwan was to reflect the fact that the territory was a foreign country; in the instance of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, foreign territories that were part of Georgia. Russia would not violate any international rules or norms in its engagement with the frozen territories. The underlying purpose, he stressed, was to bring official services closer to those who hold Russian citizenship. Russia was not seeking to provoke a fight, and Putin had communicated this to Saakashvili. (Note: In a separate meeting on April 14, MFA Georgia Desk confirmed Ekho Moskvii and Nezavisimaya Gazeta reports on the imminent decree by Putin designed to establish a semi-official relationship with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow press reports maintained that the decree would enable Russian ministries and government agencies to establish direct contact with their Abkhazian "counterparts." Although not a Russian consulate, the "representative" office would serve the interests of the Russian citizens living in the separatist regions, said the press.)

Coordinating with Europeans

¶7. (C) In an April 15 conversation with the German Ambassador, the Ambassador urged a concerted approach to the GOR, and will push for a coordinated approach during an April 16 meeting of Quad Ambassadors. The French and German embassies confirm that they have not received instructions for engaging with Russia on the expected decree.

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